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Area residents and lawmakers from both political parties are angered over British Petroleum's plans to significantly increase discharges of ammonia and industrial waste into Lake Michigan, as part of a planned \$3 billion expansion and modernization of the company's refinery in Whiting, Ind., near Chicago.

BP recently received a permit from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and Indiana Department of Environmental Management, which critics contend will allow the company to increase discharges of ammonia into the lake by more than 50 percent and suspended solids by 35 percent.

BP officials say the increase discharges will have no negative impact on the environment or lake water quality, and the proposed refinery expansion will allow it to greatly increase oil production for Chicago area consumers.

"People are outraged because Lake Michigan is our gem, our drinking water and our way of life," said Max Muller, environmental advocate for Environment Illinois.

U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk of Highland Park co-sponsored a resolution that passed the House by 387-26 vote last week condemning BP's plan for increased dumping into the lake. BP's application would permit the dumping of more than 1,500 pounds of ammonia and nearly 5,000 pounds of suspended solids into the lake every day, according to Kirk's office.

"The Great Lakes are a source of drinking water for 40 million Americans. This kind of dumping is going to create a long-term hazard for our drinking water and beach safety," he said.

Kirk said the dumping of ammonia increases algae blooms that can kill fish and trigger beach closings in the lakes. He said approximately 81 percent of Illinois beaches are closed sometime during the summer because of algae and other pollutants.

"It would also set a dangerous precedent that this is first new dumping into the lake in 10 years, and we think it should not be allowed. We think there should be a ban on new dumping," he said.

In June, Kirk, along with U.S. Rep. Dan Lipinski introduced legislation calling for a federal ban on all dumping in the Great Lakes by 2027.

Kirk, along with mayors and local officials from 10 North Shore communities, has launched a Shoreline Mayors Task Force to oppose the BP plan. Representatives from Wilmette, Kenilworth, Highland Park, Highwood, Glencoe, Lake Forest, Lake Bluff, North Chicago and Waukegan attended a meeting at Kirk's district office on Monday and will participate in the task force. Winnetka also is expected to be represented on the task force. The task force will work on the immediate issue of BP's planned dumping but also will address other environmental issues impacting shoreline communities including sewage dumping and asbestos at Illinois Beach State Park.

At the state level, State Sen. Susan Garrett of Lake Forest, and Sen. John Millner of Carol Stream, have introduced a resolution in the state Senate urging the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to prohibit BP from increasing discharges of ammonia and other pollutants into Lake Michigan. State Rep. Karen May of Highland Park has proposed a similar resolution in the House.

May said she's particularly concerned that some of the industrial wastes that are discharged will include heavy metals such as mercury.

"I am outraged by what Indiana is trying to pull," she said. "We've worked so hard to clean up the lake and this is a major setback. We need to stop this. We in Illinois have worked hard to get mercury out of environment, and this is a huge step backward."

The city of Highland Park has also passed a resolution opposing the BP plan.

BP spokesperson Valerie Corr said their refinery expansion and modernization project was carefully reviewed by the U.S. EPA and Indiana regulators, who found it would have no negative impacts on the environment or public health.

Corr noted that any effluent materials that are discharged into the lake go through an extensive wastewater treatment process and meet all federal and state standards to protect the public health and environment. As part of the proposed expansion, Corr said BP is investing \$150 million in upgrades to the existing wastewater treatment plant at the Whiting refinery.

"We don't dump sludge or toxic waste into Lake Michigan," she said.

She said the refinery modernization and expansion will allow the refinery to process more crude oil from Canada which will benefit Chicago area consumers at the gas pump.

"We're certainly committed to continued dialogue on project," she said. "This project is currently in the permitting phase and it's not scheduled to be completed until 2011. We're confident we can modernize the Whiting refinery to make an additional 260 million gallons of gasoline every year for Chicago and Midwest customers from a secure and reliable source of North American crude oil in a way that protects Lake Michigan."

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